

Palermo Open City: From the Mediterranean Migrant Crisis to a Europe Without Borders?

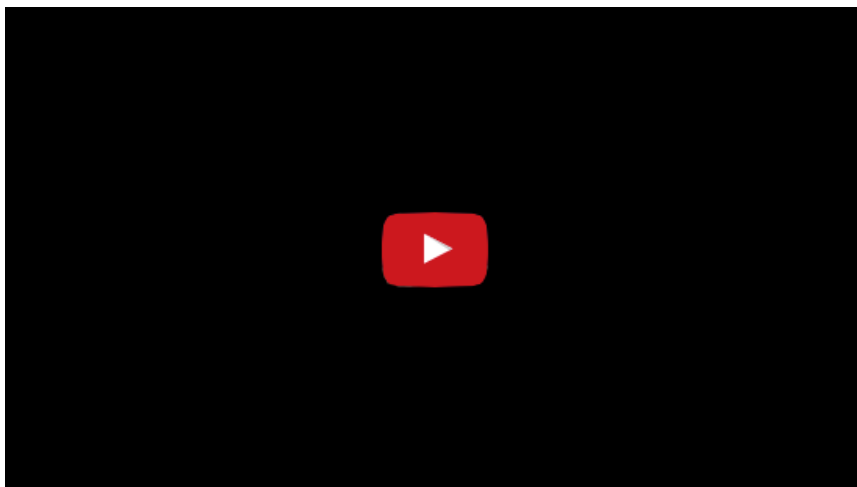
LEOLUCA ORLANDO + SIMON PARKER

interview + essay

LEOLUCA ORLANDO should probably have a bio in this location.

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PALERMO OPEN CITY, PART 1



Interview with Leoluca Orlando, Mayor of Palermo, Month XX, 2015

PALERMO OPEN CITY, PART 2

Leoluca Orlando is one of the longest lasting and most successful political leaders in post-war Italy. He has been elected mayor of Palermo – a city that was once the stronghold of the Sicilian mafia, no less than four times since 1985 – most recently in 2012 with over 70% of the popular vote. This despite campaigning to rid his city and region of what Orlando refers to as the plague of organized crime. A plague which nevertheless maintains its tenacious hold on important areas of economic, social and political life on the island.

The walls of the Council Chamber in Palermo are studded with plaques to the memories of public servants, priests and ordinary citizens who have been murdered by the Mafia, including several of Orlando's closest partners. Indeed, it was the murder of Piersanti Mattarella – the then-regional president of Sicily in 1980 – that obliged the young human rights lawyer to abandon a promising university career for the highly dangerous vocation of public office. Piersanti's brother Sergio is currently the President of the Italian Republic and remains a close friend and confidant of Palermo's outspoken mayor.

Now aged 68 and three years into what may well be his final mandate, Orlando is fired with a new mission – that of restoring Palermo to its historical primacy as the cradle of a cosmopolitan “Arab-Norman” Mediterranean culture. “The city of Palermo is not a Mediterranean city,” argues Orlando, “it is a Middle

Eastern city in Europe” that shares as much in common with Beirut and Djibouti as with Rome or Hamburg.

Although Palermo’s first citizen is often accused by critics of being better at performing the role of embattled mayor than at the practical politics of sorting out Palermo’s notorious transport problems (Orlando has even won an award for an acting role in a German feature film), the City Council has shown its commitment to recognizing Palermo’s increasingly diverse population by instituting a Council of Cultures (*Consulta delle culture*). The council’s members are elected from among the city’s some 125 different nationalities and 100 spoken languages.

The young President of the council, Adham Darawsha, is a Palestinian doctor who emphasizes the importance of representing the city’s diverse population – and, in particular, of “promoting the richness of culture and the capacity for dialogue among the various communities, uniting political representation with different cultural and social activities.”¹ The Council of Cultures sees its role as guaranteeing that new residents of the city are able to take their place as full citizens in the city’s political and institutional life, regardless of their nationality or immigration status.

Mayor Orlando sums up the work of the Council of Cultures as “the practical application of a model where citizenship rights are related only to residence.”²

The rejection of “the tyranny of the residence permit” is a key principle of the Orlando administration’s support of international human mobility. The Charter of Palermo, which was approved by the City Council in March 2015, bears the subtitle: “From migration as suffering to mobility as an inalienable human right.”

By insisting “*Io sono persona, I am Human*,” Orlando – in his capacity as the regional President of the Association of Local Authorities, which includes other provinces across Sicily, and in working with his own administration – aims to deploy the institutional resources of the municipality on behalf of those whom the national authorities fail to protect. According to the Palermo Charter,

*There is a need to . . . carry out a radical reform of the citizenship law [which has been] postponed for decades by the Italian Parliament. The archaic reference to jus sanguinis has to be abandoned . . . and time and red tape that hinder the recognition of Italian citizenship has to be reduced without leaving it to the discretion and/or the sensitivity of local administrations.*³

The Charter also affirms the right to work, health care, social assistance, and housing. Its authors insist that with the abolition of the residence permit, which traps migrants in an inferior and precarious legal status, it will be more possible to treat migrants “as people, as human beings, regardless of the document that establishes their status . . . [I]t means seeing them as active citizens able to develop value for the community and for the place where they live.”

*It is time that the European Union abolishes the residence permit for all those who migrate, affirming the freedom of movement of people, as well as of capital and goods, in the globalized world.*⁴

1. Adham Darawsha, ‘Consulta delle Culture’ accessed 1 February 2016. <http://www.comune.palermo.it/noticext.php?id=3039>, Comune di Palermo 10 November 2013.

2. Comune di Palermo, Mobilita’ Umana Internazionale – Carta Di Palermo 2015, Dalla migrazione come sofferenza alla mobilità come diritto umano inalienabile http://www.comune.palermo.it/js/server/uploads/_20032015172842.pdf. March 2015, accessed 1 February 2016

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

Sicilians – who for centuries were forced to emigrate to the industrial north of Italy, Europe and the New World in search of land to farm or work to sustain themselves and their families – know the historical realities of a globalized world all too well. In more recent years Sicily has been the principle arrival point for a growing population of refugees and migrants traveling through Libya and across the Mediterranean in dangerous, overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels. The sinking of two migrant smuggler boats off the coast of Lampedusa on 3 and 11 October, leading to the deaths of nearly 400 refugees, caused such a level of international outcry that the Italian navy and coast guard launched the emergency search and rescue operation known as *Mare Nostrum*, which succeeded in saving over 150,000 lives before it was wound down in October 2014.

Faced with another tragic sinking in April 2015, taking over 800 lives when a smuggler vessel capsized during an attempted rescue operation, the European Union was forced to double the size of *Operation Triton* (launched as a more minimal search and rescue response following the cessation of *Mare Nostrum*). The Port of Palermo became a landing ground for dozens of rescue disembarkations. Survivors were often greeted on the quayside by Mayor Orlando and the Archbishop of Palermo, Corrado Lorefice.

Orlando has clearly been deeply affected by his encounters with the survivors of these perilous journeys – many of whom have been pulled out of the sea after having witnessed their fellow passengers drown. He is not afraid to repeat the accusation that the European Union is guilty of “genocide” in the Mediterranean for failing to guarantee safe passage to millions of people who have been forced to put their lives into the hands of unscrupulous smugglers in order to avoid death and persecution.

“Sicily” is by contrast, in Orlando’s view, “a positive example for the rest of the world. Imagine in the last 20 months, 300,000 immigrants arrived in Sicily – you have not heard one single act of racism, one single act of intolerance. Neither a simple ‘go home!’ Nothing, nothing, nothing...” He encourages those who want inspiration for a more humane response to consider the fact that the small town of Pozzallo, with its 16,000 inhabitants, saw 38,000 immigrants arrive in the previous year – all with no acts of intolerance.

Orlando insisted that the previous practice of making newly arrived refugees to Palermo run a gauntlet of armed police had to stop. He has urged those looking for better ways of treating asylum seekers to “come to Palermo” because “everything is well organized – health care, cultural mediators, social help, the Caritas volunteers, the Red Cross, and anything are working well...[T]he tragedy is before they arrive, the tragedy is when they leave the Port of Palermo.”

The Palermo Charter also highlights why those who are keen to exploit the hapless victims of war, conflict and famine are just as present in the territory of Italy as in Africa: “The situation of... Italian hospitality is already very critical. If hospitality and integration processes... are not guaranteed, the protection system is likely to reproduce favor-seeking behavior and become a factory of marginalization that will impinge on all of us.”⁵ The Charter goes on to criticize the “opaque management and concentration of people in places that defy [the] possibility of control,” which is something of a euphemism for the ongoing cor-

5. *Ibid.*

ruption scandal surrounding the immigration “welcome” industry centered on Rome – “Mafia Capitale.”

Due to the large concentration of first reception centers (known as CARA) and smaller second stage accommodation facilities (known as SPRAR) in Sicily, lucrative contracts, which spontaneously created various “cooperatives” and “not for profit” organizations, have successfully and corruptly been obtained in Rome via the so-called “*Tavolo di coordinamento nazionale sull’immigrazione*” (national coordinating table on immigration). The migration reception and accommodation market across Italy, and especially in Sicily, has become a byword for criminality, exploitation and trafficking.

Indeed, as one of Italy’s leading human rights and immigration experts, Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo, has pointed out, the absence of a genuine policy of asylum support is the main reason why so many refugees and migrants who land in Sicily see Italy as a transit country to be crossed as soon as possible rather than as a place of refuge. Vassallo points to the recent case of a group of Sudanese refugees who were left without water in an occupied social center (*Laboratorio Zeta*) in Palermo, where they constantly faced the risk of eviction despite the fact that they had nowhere else to live. The Sudanese were forced to trek across the island in search of barely-paid, illicit agricultural work controlled of criminal gangs. Their lack of legal status and the often 3 year-long wait for a decision from the local asylum commission leaves refugees like the Sudanese in a limbo – a limbo that no charters or declarations from the marble halls of the Palazzo Municipale are capable of resolving.⁶ There are also well-documented accounts of young Nigerian women who were trafficked out of Libya as refugees and who – after only a few days in a Palermo reception “welcome center” – were found working as prostitutes around the streets of the port. According to local NGOs, many of them are under age and are left to the mercy of pimps and traffickers by the authorities. This is how the underground and criminal economy of the Italian South, as well as many northern cities, benefit from the precarious status and the denial of human rights that Italy’s failed asylum system perpetually reproduces.

But despite the propensity of European politicians to “imagine that the European people are intolerant,” in the view of the ever-optimistic Mayor of Palermo, “in the stomachs of European people there is a culture of welcoming.” Certainly, the many Austrians who volunteered to drive stranded refugees across the border when the Hungarian authorities refused to provide transport to the thousands of migrants trapped in Budapest support Orlando’s interpretation. Likewise, the spontaneous welcome committees that greeted exhausted refugees upon their arrival in the train stations of southern Germany must support Orlando’s interpretation. Yet, the “events of Cologne” on New Year’s Eve (the alleged sexual assaults on women by young male migrants) as well as the right wing, anti-migrant “patrols” in Sweden, France and Finland all point to a more troubling response to the refugee crisis. They point to the dangerous potential for political exploitation by chauvinist and xenophobic political parties and governments.

An apposite passage in Benjamin Barber’s *If Mayors Ruled the World* (2013), also cited by Zygmunt Bauman, seems to capture this crisis of gover-

6. Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo, ‘Sui migranti i poteri delle organizzazioni criminali’ <http://www.meltingpot.org/Sui-migranti-i-poteri-delle-organizzazioni-criminali.html#.Vq-CX-5OLTnU> Progetto Melting Pot Europa, accessed 1 February 2016

nance, which has been revealed (rather than engendered) by the so-called migration crisis:

After a long history of regional success, the nation-state is failing us on the global scale. It was the perfect political recipe for the liberty and independence of autonomous peoples and nations. It is utterly unsuited to interdependence.⁷

This sentiment was also echoed by the Mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, in a “Manifesto” for places of refuge (*We, the cities of Europe*) launched in September 2015. The mayors of Paris, Lesvos, Coruña, Cadiz, Santiago de Compostela, and Zaragoza have also adhered to this call:

We, the cities of Europe, are ready to become places of refuge. We want to welcome these refugees. States grant asylum status but cities provide shelter. Border towns, such as Lampedusa, or the islands of Kos and Lesbos, are the first to receive the flow of people seeking asylum, and European municipalities will have to take these people in and ensure they can start a new life, safe from the dangers from which they have escaped. We have the space, services and, most importantly, the support of our citizens to do so. Our municipal services are already working on refugee reception plans to ensure food, a roof, and dignity for everyone fleeing war and hunger. The only thing missing is state support.⁸

The manifesto continues:

For years European governments have spent most asylum and migration funds on reinforcing our borders and turning Europe into a fortress. This mistaken policy is the reason why the Mediterranean has become the graveyard for thousands of refugees attempting to come and share our freedom. It is time to change our priorities: to allocate funds to ensure refugees in transit are welcomed, to provide resources for cities that have offered themselves as places of refuge. This is not the time for hollow words or empty speeches, it's time for action.⁹

Whether they are veteran champions of a Sicily freed from the blight of organized crime (such as Leoluca Orlando) or new political leaders who have emerged from movements for economic justice and the right to housing in the wake of globalized austerity (such as Ada Colau of Barcelona), we can detect in this new urban movement a strong demand for solidarity – a solidarity that extends not only across the Mediterranean, across the countries of Europe, but also across continents. Just as the medieval walls that once surrounded the fortified cities of Christian Europe had no purpose in an age of capitalist driven urbanization, so the barriers and borders that the European Union seeks to erect against those who demand the right to life and freedom cannot be maintained in the face of a global justice that is unequivocal and universal in its application and practice.

As the European Council and the European Commission attempt to rebuild and strengthen Fortress Europe from the ruins of Schengenland, humanitarian

7. Zygmunt Bauman, *Quo vadis, Europe?* <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/zygmunt-bauman/quo-vadis-europe> 2 June 2014 OpenDemocracy accessed 1 February 2016

8. Ada Colau, ‘We, the Cities of Europe’ <http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/alcaldesa/en/blog/we-cities-europe> 13 September 2015 accessed 1 February 2016

9. *Ibid.*

rescue and solidarity operations are being criminalized in the fatal waters and on the shores of the Aegean – from Dunkirk, Presevo, Idomeni and Lesvos to Lampedusa. Thousands of volunteers from Europe and around the world are thus forming an international brigade of support – a brigade that refuses to be fenced off, tear gassed into submission, or intimidated by border guards, riot shields and truncheons.

The struggle for a Mediterranean and a Europe without borders is also, as Leoluca Orlando put it, the struggle for “the right not to die in the country of one’s birth.” Having contributed to the generation of the conflicts from which over 80 % of the refugees are fleeing, it is now incumbent on Europe’s leaders to offer solutions instead of paying states with dubious human rights records to meet its own legal and moral obligations. The coming months and years will demonstrate whether the European Union’s determination to submit progressive migration policies (whether local, regional, or national) to a logic of exclusion and expulsion will hold together its crumbling *acquis communautaires* – namely, the accumulated legislation and court decisions comprising European law.

Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk may well have underestimated the determination of Mediterranean Europe’s progressive civic leadership to defend their politics of solidarity against the dehumanizing logic of the impermeable frontier. In this brave new world of nations on the move, a political class that refuses to accept the *need* (as Orlando reminds us) to re-imagine what it even means to be European will be condemned to deal with a far more dangerous prospect: an alienated and angry lost generation whose memories of their initial encounters with Europe risk being dominated by hostility, prejudice and fear.